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again to explain things to his family made him halfway sick.

On an impulse, he counted the money he'd wadded in his pants pocket. Plenty for a ticket. There was a train for Baltimore in forty minutes, he found out at the station. He got a milk shake and hunched over the counter, reading funnies. But Dora's voice dragged him, saying, "You're growing up in streaks, Corky."

It was such a relief to get on the train that he fell asleep. And when the conductor shook him, in Baltimore, it was half past seven and there he was and everything was swell. Going up the steps from the train, he grinned when he looked down at his slacks and sneakers. No luggage. Just walking off, where he belonged. He'd locate Tom first, if he could, before he called the family. Then everything would be all set. Finding a phone booth, he shoved in a nickel, and Tom answered the second ring.

"You're early," Tom said. "How'd you get away?"

"Just came along," said Corky. "What'll I do—go out to your place?"

"I'll meet you at a joint on the corner. I haven't eaten," Tom said. "You got money for a cab?" He gave Corky directions, and they hung up.

When Corky paid off his driver and looked around, he saw the place right away, next to a set of dirty marble steps. It said BARS in definite red letters, and the smell of beer hit him and rolled over him as he went in.

Tom crashed him on the back. "How's it, kid?" said Tom.

"You look swell, guy," Corky said, and the words sounded phony, because he remembered the last time he'd seen Tom, leaning out of a creek-jawed little train, his cap hanging on one ear. Now, all that was natural about Tom was his voice.

They went on to a table near the bar, and the juke box was whining, and you had to shove between people to move. Corky looked sideways at Tom, and met Tom's cautious glance.

"You check your bag?" asked Tom.

"I'll have my stuff sent on," said Corky. "After I get the job."

"Oh, the job's all fixed," Tom said as they sat down. "It's waiting for you."

Corky looked across the small table. Tom's hair was longer now, slicked back shiny. It gave a different look to his face. He looked like a lot of other guys, instead of looking like Tom. Which was funny. You'd expect him to look like other guys when he was in uniform, not now.

"You climb out of a bedroom window to get here?" Tom asked.

Corky laughed and felt better. Tom sounded natural, all right, even if the clothes were a shock. Now, why would anyone buy that stuff?

"Where'd you get the jacket?"

"Sharp, huh?" said Tom, looking pleased.

He had to answer a few questions about men in their flight, before he could get Tom on the subject of the job. "You like the work?" he asked eagerly.

"It's O.K.," Tom said. The flatness of his voice dismayed Corky.

"What's wrong?"

"It's a job," Tom said. "It's a war plant, and that's the main point. But it's piston and it isn't pistons. You know what I mean? Keeps reminding me I'm not there. Maybe it'd be smart to get into munitions."

"You're a big help," Corky said. "I've spent most of the afternoon refusing to go into my old man's shell-case factory."

"You nuts?" said Tom.

"I can do what I want over here," Corky said. Now he was explaining to Tom, and everything was nuts. "We can go around, crack up some fun, after work."

"It isn't the same," Tom said vaguely. "What isn't?"

Tom yelled for chops and French fries and coffee. He stared at Corky. "It'll be swell having you around, but ——" He moved his shoulders restlessly. "They chucked me out of the Air Force. I'd like to dig in somewhere it mattered more. Corky, I work like hell, but something's wrong."

"Yeah?" Corky leaned farther across the table, trying to get away from the blare of the juke box. "Go on, Tom."

"I dunno. You've got a place where you belong—and you don't want it."

"So you're telling me to go home," said Corky. "Everybody's nuts. Here we go on the merry-go-round."

"What's that?" said Tom, staring. "Hey, I'm giving you a big welcome mat. Why don't you tell me to dry up? Eat something, Corky, and we'll prowl. We could pick up a couple of gals. This is some town for dames."

Corky saw Dora's hair, swinging in the sun, very clean and shiny. "We could take in a movie," he said. "I ate, home."

Either that had been a large-sized milk shake or the heavy smoky air was getting him down—anyway, he wasn't hungry. "You eat here much, Tom?"

"Most nights. Restaurants are packed here."

Corky said slowly, "I've got to phone home."

"Well, get going while I eat."

There wasn't any seat in the phone booth, and Corky waited out some coins and fought the door closed. Somebody leaned against the door as soon as he got it closed. From the air inside, they kept the beer in the phone booth.

The whole tavern was stuffy, and banging full of noise and people. Tom wasn't the way he'd expected, and Tom wasn't keen about the plane plant. Corky looked ahead at a newly bleak vista of Baltimore evenings, and grimaced wryly. Here he was, with Tom and a job at the plant.

His father answered the phone. "Hello. Yes?"

"This is Corky."

"Oh. Where are you?"

Corky made his voice flat and firm. "Baltimore," he said.

There was a silence, and the wire crackled and snapped in Corky's ear. "You there?" he asked finally.

"Yeah," said his father, and there was something unexpected about his voice. "You could have said good-by to your mother."

Corky heard the voice more than the words. Now what had got into dad? He said, in final, complete declaration of independence, "I got the job over here."

"That so?" said his father. "Well, you'll want your clothes and stuff, won't you? You coming home week ends?"

Corky leaned against the wall of the booth, and there wasn't anything to say next. If his father had yelled at him, that would have been easy. He had won, and it had been so quick he'd walked right off into space.

"Cort?"

"Oh, sure," he said hastily. "Sure, I'll be home next week end, dad." He waited, and then said, "Thanks for not hurting the wire up at me."

"No percentage in that, I guess," his dad said. "Well, anyhow, you got what you wanted."

"Say good night to mom," Corky said.

"Yeah. By, Cort."

"By," said Corky.

As he hung up, he caught, like an echo, the tiredness in his father's voice. *It was all a bluff, that tough line at the last this afternoon,* he thought swiftly. *That was second I wouldn't stay, and he sensed hard.*

Starting to leave the booth, he hesitated, with a dragging reluctance. He had the job, but Tom and the plane plant wasn't so good; maybe you could see too much of planes every day, when you couldn't be with the other boys, flying them. "Anyhow, you got what you

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